

# A Roundtable on John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*

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James Graham Wilson, and John Lewis Gaddis

## Review of John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*

Andrew Buchanan

John Gaddis writes beautifully, and his latest book dances through time and space with lightness and erudition, skipping from Xerxes crossing the Hellespont to the musings of Isaiah Berlin via brushes with Elizabeth I, Carl von Clausewitz, Leo Tolstoy, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. It is delightful stuff, and one can imagine students in his seminar at Yale lapping it up. The problem, as one of those students might say, is that for all the layers of learning and literary allusion, it's not clear that there's much "there there." Throughout the book, Gaddis keeps returning—"pounding to the point of monotony," as reviewer Victor Davis Hanson puts it—to one single, simple idea: successful grand strategy depends on aligning "aspirations with capabilities" (105).<sup>1</sup> As a contribution to a discussion on *grand strategy*, a term whose usage according to one recent commentator has "increased exponentially since the end of the Cold War," it can be pretty thin stuff.<sup>2</sup>

The first six chapters touch lightly on a sprawling range of subjects, ranging from catastrophic imperial overstretch in Athens to the accomplishments of the founding fathers who, we are told, fitted "foundations to the ground on which they rest" (154). Nowhere does Gaddis seek to define his subject or to explain what differentiates "grand" from regular strategy. Sun Tzu pops up to make the occasional gnomic comment, but beyond that, Gaddis's finely drawn vignettes are bound by their common Eurocentrism.

There is a noticeable change of gear as Gaddis gets onto more familiar ground in chapters on the "Greatest Strategists" (Clausewitz and—oddly—Tolstoy), the "Greatest President" (Lincoln), and the "Last Best Hope" (Franklin Roosevelt). Gaddis approaches Clausewitz warily, warning his students that a "close reading" of *On War* is liable to produce "mental disorientation" and "doubts . . . about who you are" (190). In case we missed the point, *On War* is likened to an "immense dripping net of entangled octopi" (192). It's a wonderful metaphor, but is it *On War*? It is true that Clausewitz's dialectical method, inherited from Kant and—in all likelihood—Hegel, takes a bit of getting used to, and the substantial sections of the book dealing with specific operational challenges are simply outdated. But books 1 and 8, the only sections that Clausewitz revised before his untimely death from cholera in 1831, are pretty clear. What is head spinning is not Clausewitz's complexity, but the relevance and applicability of his theoretical conclusions.

Clausewitz's well-known assertion that war is a "continuation of political activity by other means" clearly bears on Gaddis's concern with the alignment of military means and political ends.<sup>3</sup> More important, perhaps, it also probes the ways in which the attainment of specific political goals is one of the major constraints—the other being the inevitable operation of "friction"—that inhibits the inherent tendency of war to proceed towards an "absolute" state, or to what we might now refer to as "total war." For Clausewitz, the relationship between politics and war is a *dialectical* interaction, not one between fixed entities; war, unfolding according to its own logic, influences and modifies politics just as politics seeks to harness war. Clausewitz, as Gaddis notes, clearly relishes exploring these contradictions and their complex and always-evolving syntheses, but he also historicizes them, rooting theory in the "proper soil" of "experience."<sup>4</sup>

The theoretical conclusions presented in *On War* were the fruit of years of experience fighting against the military consequences of the French Revolution. With the revolution, Clausewitz saw, the French war effort became the "business of the people," allowing the "full weight of the nation" to be mobilized and ensuring that "nothing now impeded the vigor with which war could be waged."<sup>5</sup> In this sense, "politics" did not just "inflare" war, as Gaddis suggests, but *transformed* it, allowing it to transcend "all limits" and to approach its "absolute perfection" (197).<sup>6</sup> That absolute (or "total") state was, of course, historically conditioned by existing levels of industrial and technological development, but new means of mobilizing resources and manpower allowed new political goals to be set. It was this dynamic inter-relationship between ends and means, not a simple failure to align one with the other, that helped to propel Napoleon to Moscow and to disaster. Without massively expanded means in the form of the nearly 700,000-strong Grande Armée, the invasion of Russia would have been unthinkable.

Clausewitz's understanding of the interrelationship between politics and war enabled him, as Michael Howard argues, to "outlast his time."<sup>7</sup> Based on his own experience of war, Clausewitz drew theoretical conclusions that transcended time-bound operational advice; indeed, without that theoretical leap, his work—as Clausewitz himself explained—would have remained at the level of "commonplaces and truisms."<sup>8</sup> Gaddis claims to value theory, and he laments the ways in which history's veneration for "specialized research" has allowed a "gap" to open up between the "study of history and the construction of theory" (23). I am with Gaddis on this. Specialized, detailed, and painstaking research should provide for

historians what practical military experience provided for Clausewitz—namely, and in his own wonderfully evocative language, the “soil” from which the “flowers of theory” can grow.<sup>9</sup>

Gaddis’s embrace of theory could have opened the door to a number of fruitful avenues of enquiry. Perhaps the most important of these would be an examination of the interrelationship between determinism, contingency, and agency. One of the most crucial contributions of the academically marginalized study of military history is that it poses these questions with particular salience. Clausewitz understood from experience that “no other human activity is so continuously and universally bound up with chance” as war, but he also understood that wars unfold in historically determined contexts.<sup>10</sup> Or, as Karl Marx—himself an admirer of Clausewitz—reminds us, “men make their own history . . . but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, having opened the door to theoretical inquiry, Gaddis does not step through. Instead, his “theory” devolves to the kind of American pragmatism that reduces theoretical conclusions to simple commonsensical aphorisms.

For a book with grand aspirations—Gaddis is concerned that his use of Clausewitzian “On” in the title risks “raising eyebrows”—this is a bit of a comedown (xi). Gaddis doesn’t try to define his subject beyond the anodyne claim that “proportionality comes from what grand strategy is: the alignment of potentially infinite aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities” (312). And that’s *it*? Surprisingly, he does not engage with any of the numerous definitions of grand strategy advanced by historians and political scientists, none of which betters that offered by his Yale colleague, Paul Kennedy.

In a 1991 essay, Kennedy argued that the “crux of grand strategy” lies in “the capacity of a nation’s leaders to bring together all the elements, both military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term . . . best interests.”<sup>12</sup> Developing this theme, Williamson Murray adds that grand strategy demands an “intertwining of political, social, and economic realities with military power.”<sup>13</sup> These definitions point towards a complex and multi-layered process that integrates different forms of power and strands of power projection. Murray points out that “resources, will, and interests inevitably find themselves out of balance,” and that aligning them is an important *aspect* of grand strategy: it is not, however, a summary of the thing itself.<sup>14</sup>

Murray also suggests that effective practitioners of grand strategy have a capacity to act “beyond the demands of the present,” keeping their eyes on the horizon amid the daily chaos of war and politics.<sup>15</sup> These characteristics describe Franklin D. Roosevelt perfectly, and in his discussion of American grand strategy in the first half of the twentieth century Gaddis finds firmer ground. He situates the development of American policy within the framework of a growing concern, expressed in the statecraft of British prime minister Lord Salisbury, in the geopolitics of Halford Mackinder, and in the analytical insight of Foreign Office mandarin Eyre Crowe, that modern land communications would enable the emergence of a world-dominant superpower in the Eurasian “heartland.” This concern, focused in particular on the rising power of a unified Germany, led Britain to abandon the “splendid isolation” that had carried it through the nineteenth century in favor of a “continental commitment.” That, in turn, ultimately led it to a reluctant appeal to the “new world” to redress the

balance of power in the “old” (264-65).

Rightly, I think, Gaddis sees the threat of a German-dominated Eurasia as the primary driver behind Woodrow Wilson’s decision to lead the United States into the Great War in 1917. In the recurrent waves of Wilson’s champions and iconoclasts, Gaddis stands firmly with the latter, arguing that “Wilson’s ends floated too freely above means” (271). He does not, however, pinpoint what this critical divergence looked like. Gaddis argues that the arrival of American soldiers in France in 1918 tipped the military balance in the Allies’ favor, but he misses the point that there was no German military “collapse” *before* the outbreak of the German Revolution in October/November 1918 (270). Wilson imagined that an American imperium could be constructed primarily by means of economic might and moral example. Both are critical elements of global hegemony, but they must be backed by decisive military superiority; this America lacked, partly as a result of its late entry into the war and partly because the Second Reich was toppled by domestic revolution before it could suffer military defeat.

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different mental equipment. I agree with Gaddis that Roosevelt’s training and experience, derived from the attitudes and assumptions inherited from Theodore Roosevelt, from his study of Alfred Thayer Mahan, and from his service as assistant secretary of the Navy during the Great War, fundamentally shaped his grand strategic outlook.<sup>16</sup> Gaddis describes Roosevelt’s extraordinary long-range vision, arguing plausibly that his decision to extend diplomatic recognition to the USSR in 1933 was made with one eye on a future alliance against Germany. That is not enough to remove Roosevelt from the ranks of the appeasers, as Gaddis tries to do: FDR welcomed the outcome of the Munich Conference, sent Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles on a peace mission to Europe in 1940, and maintained diplomatic relations with the collaborationist Vichy regime until late 1942. It does, however, suggest that he had a Mahanian eye for the long game and that he clearly understood that successful grand strategy rests on deploying a *combination* of economic, diplomatic, military, and moral/ideological assets.

Roosevelt’s grand strategy, and in particular his alliances with Britain and the Soviet Union, led to victory in World War II at a comparatively modest cost in American lives and in a way that secured American hegemony and laid the basis for a sustained burst of postwar economic expansion. Gaddis’s main point here is surely right; the American “fire” that had “gone out” after the Great War had been spectacularly reignited under a leadership capable of “more careful coordination of means with ends than Wilson had achieved” (287-88).

It is worth adding, however, that it was much easier to craft successful grand strategy when economic growth was providing the United States and its allies with rapidly expanding means, and when—in contrast to 1918—war was not cut short by revolution prior to the full deployment of American military power. Under Roosevelt, the military might Wilson had lacked assumed genuinely global predominance, enabling him to chart a course with seemingly nonchalant ease. As leading *New York Times* journalist and Roosevelt confidante Anne O’Hare McCormick noted in a 1942 article celebrating his sixtieth birthday, the “key” to the president’s policy was that he “consciously rides the currents of time in the direction in which they are going.”<sup>17</sup>

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Robert K. Brigham

Roosevelt was acutely aware of the ways in which the lineaments of postwar predominance had to be established during the war, and economic policies shaped with an eye to the peace were woven into his grand strategic approach. As America's armies advanced, so did its market share. With much more limited means at his disposal, Churchill's strategic options were highly circumscribed. His famous June 1940 appeal to the "New World" to "set forth to the rescue and liberation of the Old" implicitly recognized that a profound shift in the relationship between the two "worlds" was imminent (181). Churchill hoped that the British elite's long years of experience would enable Britain to manage this transition in ways that would allow it to maintain its global influence. By 1944, it was clear that this was not going to work out as London hoped, and Britain eventually emerged from the war as a second-class power well on the way to losing its empire. The true brilliance of Roosevelt's grand strategy was that it secured decisive victory not only over its obvious enemies but also its erstwhile allies, paving the way for an expansive—if foreshortened—American century.

*On Grand Strategy* is entertaining, engaging, and sometimes insightful. Unfortunately, however, it does little to advance our overall understanding of this crucial subject. Despite Gaddis's best efforts, grand strategy stubbornly resists being boiled down to a single and rather self-evident injunction not to bite off more than you can chew. Complexity abounds, whether in theory or history. Multiple levels of activity are engaged simultaneously. And, as I have tried to show in relation to Roosevelt's grand strategy, the relationship between means and ends is constantly changing as the availability of resources expands or contracts and as political aims change. Thus the wartime Anglo-American alliance led to a historically unprecedented degree of bilateral military cooperation, but it also led *simultaneously* to a transition in global hegemony from Britain to the United States.

## Notes:

1. Victor Davis Hanson, "When to Wage War and How to Win War," *New York Times*, April 20, 2018.
2. Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy,'" *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2017): 27.
3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), 87.
4. *Ibid.*, 61.
5. *Ibid.*, 592.
6. *Ibid.*, 593; see also David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare As We Know It* (Boston, 2007).
7. Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford, UK, 1983), 4.
8. Clausewitz, *On War*, 61.
9. *Ibid.*, 61.
10. *Ibid.*, 85.
11. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 11 (Moscow, 1979), 103.
12. Paul Kennedy, "Grand Strategy in War and Peace," in *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, ed. Paul Kennedy (New Haven, 1991), 5.
13. Williamson Murray, "Thoughts on Grand Strategy," in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey (Cambridge, UK), 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 4.
15. *Ibid.*, 2.
16. On this question, see my *American Grand Strategy in the Mediterranean during World War II* (Cambridge, UK, 2014), 8-11, 268-70.
17. Anne O'Hare McCormick, "At 60 He is Still a Happy Warrior," *New York Times*, January 25, 1942.

John Lewis Gaddis, the Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale University, has given us a master text and a master class on leadership in his new book, *On Grand Strategy*. In ten breathtaking essays, Gaddis, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of diplomat George F. Kennan, examines what it takes to lead and how leaders must learn to align "potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities." (21) He weaves literature, history, and philosophy into a lively and informal narrative that serves as a good foundation not just for students of grand strategy but for anyone who might benefit from learning how to balance responsibility with humility.

Gaddis argues that the most successful strategists have been pragmatists who remain flexible and patient and who clearly recognize the limits of their own power. Good leaders, Gaddis tells us, have a "lightness of being... the ability, if not to find the good in bad things, then at least to remain afloat among them, perhaps to swim or to sail through them, possibly even to take precautions that can keep [them] dry." (109) For him, studying grand strategy is far more important than simply learning the immutable principles of war. Grand strategy involves prudent judgment in very trying circumstances. Learning how to avoid war without sacrificing objectives is just as important, then, as learning how to win a war.

Gaddis begins and ends his study with a word from the British philosopher and political theorist Isaiah Berlin, who popularized a line from an ancient Greek poet: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." In the world of grand strategy, it is better to be more like the fox than the single-minded and obsessed hedgehog. Foxes are intuitive thinkers who can pursue many ends. They can hold a number of unrelated and often contradictory ideas in their heads at the same time because they are adaptable and know that discernment comes from resourcefulness—using what you have available. Hedgehogs, in sharp contrast, are prisoners of their own beliefs. They relate everything to a single central vision, which makes it difficult to balance means with ends. It is often overzealous hedgehogs who dig the already-too-deep hole even deeper because they cannot rescue their strategies from grandiosity.

Who are the foxes that Gaddis admires? One is Elizabeth I. She was patient, resourceful, and more Machiavellian than most of her counterparts. She kept political rivals at bay by offering them only a glimpse of her true feelings and convictions. She also avoided the mistakes of the large empires to her south by resisting unnecessary "expenditures of resources, energy, and reputation." (123)

Elizabeth's main nemesis, Philip II of Spain, sought to use his preponderant power to overwhelm Elizabeth's England, and, with victory in hand, return the mostly Protestant island to the Roman Catholic Church. Full of the arrogance and hubris that often accompanies empire, he sent his vast navy to the North Sea to bring Elizabeth (and Holland) under his rule. Poor planning, bad weather, and two skillful British naval maneuvers sank Philip's plans along with his ships. England's Lord Charles Howard and Sir Frances Drake adeptly attacked the Spanish Armada, forcing it to take to the open seas in bad weather and thus sealing its fate. England would remain under Elizabeth's rule. Gaddis writes admiringly that the queen "was a constant only in her patriotism, her insistence on keeping ends within means, and her determination—a requirement for pivoting—never to be pinned down." (133)

Another of Gaddis's noteworthy foxes is Octavian Augustus Caesar. Unlike his adoptive father, Julius Caesar,

Octavian built coalitions, seized opportunities while pursuing his objectives, and always saw next steps where others stumbled. He relied on more-experienced generals, gave veterans needed benefits, reintroduced the rule of law and respect for the senate. He was also a shrewd judge of character and a cultivator of his empire and its people. In contrast, his chief rival, Mark Antony, was “full of empty flourishes and unsteady efforts for glory.” (77) Antony lacked Octavian’s steady hand at the helm.

And what about the hedgehogs, those leaders who failed to understand the concept of proportionality or who refused to carefully weigh ends and means? Their numbers are legion, which is one of Gaddis’s main points. Much of the human experience has been dominated by hedgehogs who failed to understand history and its cautionary tale. From the Athenian generals of the Peloponnesian War, who led a foolish and unnecessary military campaign against Sicily, to Lyndon Johnson, who decided to Americanize the war in Vietnam, one hedgehog after another has reasoned that past tactical success guaranteed victory in the future.

Along the way, these leaders lied to themselves and their followers when they claimed to have all the advantages. They reasoned by poor historical analogy to produce dubious justifications for attacking rivals and destabilizing the political environment. They took unnecessary risks to preserve an order or to shake one to its core. As Gaddis reminds us when talking about Julius Caesar at the Rubicon, Alexander the Great at the Indus, and Napoleon and Hitler on Russia’s border, a good leader must not seek ends beyond means, or sooner or later, “you’ll have to scale back your ends to fit your means.” (21) Gaddis implies that most leaders recognize their limits only after it is too late to trim the sails (Gaddis loves sailing metaphors, and so do I). Some risk is necessary—as when, during the Second World War, Churchill concluded that the Third Reich could not push the British into the sea—but the best course to steer is one that is prudent.

That brings us to two of Gaddis’s favorite strategists, the self-taught Abraham Lincoln and the enigmatic Franklin D. Roosevelt. Both men, at times, combined the best qualities of foxes and hedgehogs. Lincoln wanted to make good on the founders’ claim that all men are created equal. Gaddis writes, “What more praiseworthy cause could a hedgehog possibly pursue?” (16) But to abolish slavery by helping to pass the Thirteenth Amendment, Lincoln had to act like a fox. He resorted to backroom deals, bribes, and outright deception. He used the power of his office like a ward politician. He kept long-term aspirations and immediate necessities in mind at the same time. He also showed enormous vision and common sense. Gaddis claims that this combination is rare in the corridors of power, and it is one of the many reasons that he admires Lincoln.

Another is Lincoln’s uncommon mastery of scale, space, and time. Lincoln, unlike most political leaders, sought to be underestimated. This allowed him a slow and steady rise to power but also enabled him to keep expectations within reason. When it was his time to lead the nation, Lincoln understood that the curse and sin of slavery had to be solved on his watch. He welcomed that responsibility, according to Gaddis, because he had carefully studied the costs and risks of going to war to end slavery and preserve the Union. More than most leaders, Lincoln was a master timekeeper. He knew how to wait, when to act, and how to trust that the course of events could be managed. There would always be

unforeseen contingencies, but expecting detours became one of Lincoln’s hallmarks as president. He did not leave things to fate and did not believe that everything was God’s will. Sometimes planning, execution, and resolve win large battles. Lincoln’s ends justified his means.

Of Roosevelt, Gaddis writes, “He saw better than anyone the relationships of everything to everything else—while sharing what he saw with no one.” (307) Roosevelt was perhaps an unlikely fox when he first came to power as assistant secretary of the navy in Woodrow Wilson’s administration. Born to wealth and privilege, he had to learn how to cloak his intentions and hide his emotions. In fact, he became an expert at stripping ego and emotion from the exercise of power. Few leaders could have fared as well during the Great Depression and the Second World War, Gaddis claims, because few possessed Roosevelt’s remarkable qualities and capabilities. He “improvised, edging forward where possible, falling back when necessary, always appearing to do something, never giving in to despair, and in everything remembered what Wilson forgot—that nothing would succeed without widespread continuing public support.” (282)

This political savvy, combined with his understanding of the American people, was Roosevelt’s great gift. He maneuvered behind the scenes with great skill, all the while calming the fears of the public and keeping them steady. More than most, Gaddis claims, Roosevelt had a sense of the inner needs of many Americans. This was especially true when it came to the war. Wilson liked to think of himself as an instrument of God’s will; Roosevelt was an instrument of democracy.

Taken together, then, Lincoln and Roosevelt were pragmatists who also possessed unusual abilities. They understood the difficulties before them but did not fear responsibility or the future. Both had a good sense of what was possible and what was probable. They understood that they could not control all events or human activities, but they knew that they might be able to influence both. They were patient leaders who were skilled at managing expectations. Both remained versatile enough to capitalize on events as they unfolded and work with any player on the world stage, rather than try to force history to bend in their direction. They did not attempt to fit square pegs into round holes, nor were they prisoners of some overarching theme or belief system. Finally, Lincoln and Roosevelt thought that their wars were just and necessary because of the enormous causes and projects at stake.

It is in his descriptions of Lincoln and Roosevelt that Gaddis’s *On Grand Strategy* may get its strongest pushback from critical readers. Examining Lincoln and Roosevelt, some critics may see Gaddis’s entire pantheon of successful grand strategists as emperors who consolidated too much power in their own hands and made Hobbesian bargains to obtain their goals. Others might be critical for the opposite reason. They may claim that Gaddis’s thoughts about grand strategy are so informal and impressionistic that they bear little relationship to the way decisions actually get made.

Finally, some readers may find it odd that Gaddis spends so little time (except in the sections on Roosevelt) talking about the domestic constraints on grand strategy. Even Richard Nixon, who equated domestic politics to building outhouses in Peoria, understood that he needed a domestic strategy in order to implement his broad foreign policy vision. But I believe Gaddis answers these critics

well when he says that “the test of a good theory lies in its ability to explain the past, for only if it does can we trust what it may tell us about the future.” (10) I think Gaddis has a good theory.

Perhaps the most delightful part of this splendid book is Gaddis’s return to the classroom and his belief in the power of the humanities. Gaddis fills this book with helpful memories of past students as they grappled in class with lessons of leadership. He makes a strong case for the usefulness of history and liberal education. Even though he focuses much of his attention on the Western canon, he sees a universality in these lessons that is difficult to deny. Would this have been a better book if Gaddis had included more diverse voices? Of course. But there is much to learn here if readers keep an open mind and remain versatile, like the fox.

### Review of John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*

Peter Trubowitz

In *On Grand Strategy*, historian John Lewis Gaddis catalogues the “dos” and “don’ts” of international statecraft. Drawing on a wide range of examples from ancient times to the present, he shines a bright light on the factors that distinguish great strategists from lesser ones. These are the ability to manage contradictory goals, the wisdom to recognize missteps and reverse course midstream, and above all, an understanding of the need to keep ends and means in balance. For Gaddis, good strategy boils down to getting the alignment between one’s aspirations and capabilities right. Much of the book is about why some leaders succeed at striking that balance and others fail to do so.

Gaddis frames his analysis around the Greek poet Archilochus’s famous distinction between the fox and the hedgehog. “The fox knows many things; the hedgehog one great thing,” Archilochus wrote. Many others have employed Archilochus’s pithy formulation, most notably the philosopher Isaiah Berlin in his *The Hedgehog and the Fox*.<sup>1</sup> Gaddis leans heavily on Berlin’s treatment from start to finish, but like a good strategist, he modifies and adapts it to serve his purpose. The most successful leaders, Gaddis avers, are part fox and part hedgehog.

In Gaddis’s reworking of these venerable archetypes, the hedgehog and the fox represent two aspects of strategy: design and maneuver. Great leaders have goals that they wish to achieve. Sometimes these are lofty, inspiring ones, like Woodrow Wilson’s “making the world safe for democracy,” but often the goals are less noble, such as territorial conquest and imperial expansion. Yet even the most careful designs can break the bank if leaders are not strategic about how, when, and where they deploy their resources. Rivals rarely submit without a fight. They must be overcome or, preferably, outfoxed through strategic maneuver. It is better to outflank them than to try to overpower them; better to avoid their strengths and target their weaknesses; and better to rely on stealth, ambiguity, and deception than on brute force.

In Gaddis’s estimation, the leaders who best exemplify this combination of design and maneuver include the young Pericles, Augustus Caesar, Queen Elizabeth I, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Each kept his or her opponents off balance strategically and carefully calibrated desired ends to available means, and none of them ever

allowed ambition or ideology to dictate strategy or tactics. Failure to follow these “rules of the road,” Gaddis argues, has led many other leaders, from Xerxes to King Philip II, Napoleon, and Hitler, to bring calamity upon themselves. By confusing ends with means, they succumbed to one of the greatest traps of statecraft: strategic overextension.

The ever-present danger of leaders’ overreach runs like a dark thread through *On Grand Strategy*. Indeed, it is built into Gaddis’s very definition of successful grand strategy as “the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities” (21). That Gaddis would focus on this particular pitfall of statecraft is unsurprising. He was a young man studying American diplomatic history in graduate school at the height of the Vietnam War. In that war, America’s conduct was marked by many of the same strategic failings Gaddis warns against here: arrogance, ideological rigidity, the loss of proportion. These are important lessons. Unfortunately, all of them had to be relearned a generation later in Iraq by policymakers and academics, including, alas, Gaddis himself.<sup>2</sup>

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Gaddis is at his best when he reflects on the ways great leaders economize in making grand strategy. His account of how Queen Elizabeth relied on stealth (espionage and subversion) to buy time and keep her many international rivals at bay is illuminating. So is his treatment of Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov’s stunning use of space and territory to counter Napoleonic France’s great offensive power.

rivals at bay is illuminating. So is his treatment of Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov’s stunning use of space and territory to counter Napoleonic France’s great offensive power. By drawing Napoleon’s invading forces deep into Russia, Kutuzov stretched the Frenchman’s supply lines thin and demoralized his troops. “Few figures in history,” Gaddis says of Kutuzov, “have done more by appearing to do less” (189). Roosevelt did more, but as Gaddis shows, he also knew a thing or two

about conserving one’s power. In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt wisely avoided dividing his forces. He decided to focus on Nazi Germany first, the greater of the two threats facing America, before settling scores with Japan.

Gaddis’s views about leaders who failed are also instructive. Xerxes saw his invasion of Greece in 480 BCE fail spectacularly, but it was not because he lacked firepower. The King of Kings was forced to beat a hasty retreat across the Hellespont (the Dardanelles) because he overreached: his invading Persian armies and fleets did not carry enough food or water, and the conquered Greeks would not supply them. “Xerxes failed, as is the habit of hedgehogs, to establish a proper relationship between his ends and his means,” writes Gaddis (12). He passes similar judgment on the older Pericles and on Philip II. Pericles’s Megarian decree imposing economic sanctions upon the city of Megara shortly before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War mistook peripheral for vital interests, a precedent that Pericles’s successors felt compelled to imitate. Strategic overextension was the result. Philip II also overextended his empire, but by putting his trust in God (ideology) rather than the watchful eye of a bursar.

For all its strengths, *On Grand Strategy* is not without weaknesses. One is the short shrift Gaddis gives to politics. To be fair, he does not ignore the role of domestic politics. But he does downplay its significance in the making of grand strategy. Consider Lincoln and FDR, whom Gaddis rightly views as America’s two greatest strategists. What made them great strategists? Gaddis believes it was their ability to adjust their tactics (i.e., to be fox-like) without losing sight of their longer-term goals (hedgehog). True enough, but also critical to their success was their uncanny ability to read the public mood and, equally important,

to outmaneuver their domestic political opponents. The timing of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (which Gaddis calls "Lincoln's Tarantino," or the strategic turning point in the war) was determined largely by Lincoln's attempts to put out what he called "the [domestic] fire in the rear."<sup>3</sup> Strategic considerations, including depriving the Confederacy of slaves, mattered. But Lincoln timed the Emancipation Proclamation to achieve maximum domestic political advantage. It enabled him to shore up his political base in the North and, at the same time, shift the balance of power against the South.

Like Lincoln, Roosevelt understood that grand strategies are only as good as the domestic political foundations they stand upon. "It is a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead," Roosevelt confided to an aide, "and to find no one there."<sup>4</sup> While Roosevelt considered the rise of Nazi Germany a serious threat to American interests as early as 1936, he was forced by the demands of Depression-era politics to bide his time. Many in Roosevelt's New Deal coalition preferred butter to guns, while his Republican opponents opposed pump-priming of any kind. Until the Japanese attack reset the parameters of debate, Roosevelt was highly constrained by domestic realities. He did what any wise leader would do under similar political circumstances: he exploited diplomacy to its fullest and slowly prepared the country for the war that he knew would inevitably find its way to America's shores.

Grand strategy is thus Janus-faced: its formulation has as much to do with leaders' ability to govern effectively at home as it does with promoting the nation's interests abroad. Machiavelli captured the essence of this idea. In *The Prince*, he writes of leaders caught in a vortex of competing and often conflicting pressures, some external, others internal. "For a Prince should have two fears: one within, on account of his subjects; the other outside, on account of external powers."<sup>5</sup> As political analysts, we must widen our view so that we capture both of these essential dimensions of statecraft—geopolitics and domestic politics. One without the other will not do.

Strategic overextension is thus not the only danger that statesmen must be alert to. Writing in the middle of World War II, Walter Lippmann, America's leading political commentator of the twentieth century, wrote that the key to effective U.S. statecraft after the war would require "bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power."<sup>6</sup> His fear was less that a triumphant America's global reach would exceed its grasp and more that the United States would repeat its mistake after World War I by failing once again to reach for what it could safely grasp—namely, the mantle of international leadership. Put another way, Lippmann worried more about the risk of strategic underreach than he did about the danger of overextension.

Lippmann does not appear in the pages of *On Grand Strategy*, and that is a pity. For our understanding of the "dos" and "don'ts" of statecraft would surely benefit from Gaddis's discerning eye on when and why leaders fail to rise to the challenge. At a time when a confused America is conceding valuable strategic terrain to a clear-headed China, it is worth remembering that hubris is not the only cause of great power decline and international disorder. Just as geopolitical and domestic pressures can lead great powers to overreach, they can also combine in ways that lead them to underreach—to soft-pedal foreign commitments and abdicate international leadership. When power outstrips policy, as it does in America today, the threat is not that the nation's international aspirations will exceed its strategic capabilities, but rather the reverse. Blind ambition is one danger; reckless indifference is another.

Notes:

1. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (London, 1953).
2. For Gaddis's positive assessment of the grand strategy guiding George W. Bush's war in Iraq, see <https://www.cfr.org/interview/gaddis-bush-pre-emption-doctrine-most-dramatic-policy-shift-cold-war>.
3. On Lincoln's and Roosevelt's ability to mix politics and strategy, see my *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ, 2011).
4. H. W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York, 2008), 484.
5. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1998), 72.
6. Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston, 1943), 9.

## Review of John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*

Michael Green

Students of John Lewis Gaddis's pathbreaking diplomatic histories should expect a very different examination of the strategic art in his newest book. History is still the milieu for his thoughts on strategy, but instead of reconstructing the evolution of concepts and policies over time, as he did in *Strategies of Containment*, Gaddis takes us on a thematic journey through the ages, with the most interesting and sometimes unlikely strategic thinkers of the past three millennia as guides.

What is lost in this nonlinear approach is the opportunity to think in time—to understand the role of agency and contingency as strategic concepts collide with the reality of power and then evolve, are contested, and ultimately succeed or fail at achieving national security objectives. (Inspired by *Strategies of Containment*, this is what I tried to achieve with my own recent history of American statecraft in Asia, *By More than Providence*). The lessons of straight history are more immediately obvious to students and policymakers, but Gaddis has a different aim with *On Grand Strategy*—to explore deeper questions about the human condition that bear on strategy rather than to understand the evolution of strategies themselves. This is not a book about how to conceptualize and execute grand strategy, in other words. It is a book about how to think strategically.

The central and most important lesson that permeates this rich volume is the importance of humility. The word "strategy" derives from the ancient Greek word for "commander" (*strategos*), and the concept of "grand" strategy seems to elevate the role of agency to the level of unbridled egoism. Yet Gaddis reminds us that one of the greatest strategic thinkers of all time, Abraham Lincoln, was also one of the humblest and of course, in a formal sense, the least educated. Lincoln's edge was that he could understand the constraints and tragedy of the human condition. And so, the volume seems to say, can you.

Gaddis's argument is propelled by a series of fundamental and often unresolvable contradictions that confront strategists. The Lincolns of history are those who can understand these contradictions. Gaddis quotes Sun Tzu's observation that, "opposites held in mind simultaneously" are "the strategist's keys to victory." Or as Clausewitz put it, "Where two ideas form a true logical antithesis, each is implied in the other. If the limitations of our mind do not allow us to comprehend both simultaneously, and discover by antithesis the whole of one in the whole of the other, each will nevertheless shed enough light on the other to clarify many of its details."<sup>1</sup>

Gaddis has a sense of the dialectical, but he never takes the reader to the synthesis. There are no eternal lessons for how to execute strategy. There are no predictions. There is no scientific certainty. Karl Marx and Jomini are not invited to this party. They were not strategists. They predicted and

prescribed instead of intuiting.

The first and most central theme Gaddis introduces is one he takes from the Greek poet Archilochus of Paros—later appropriated by the twentieth-century British philosopher Isaiah Berlin—about the fox and the hedgehog. “The fox knows many things,” Archilochus wrote, “but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” The hedgehogs of history are not humble. They fixate and overextend, only to collapse in ignominy because of their failure to align potentially unlimited ends with limited means: Xerxes in Asia minor, Philip II in the English Channel, Napoleon in the unforgiving frozen wasteland of the Russian steppe, and Wilson with his vision of perpetual peace. The foxes are those who respect constraints, acknowledge dilemmas, anticipate contingency, and demonstrate agility: Pericles, Octavian Caesar, Elizabeth I, Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, among others.

At one point, Gaddis also contrasts history and political science, two disciplines increasingly at odds as each group of scholars retreats to its methodological safe zone. Reading Gaddis’s brief lamentation of this trend, I was reminded of the debate between a historian and political scientist staged over dinner at the 2011 Lone Star Seminar at the University of Texas at Austin. The political scientist complained that historians’ obsession with context and detail is what his discipline

calls “trivia.” The historian retorted that reducing history to two simple variables is what his discipline calls “talking to small children.” Gaddis reminds both that strategic thinking requires the political scientist’s ability to explore generalizable theories and the historian’s ability to provide context. “Strategy,” he argues, “requires a sense of the whole that reveals the significance of the respective parts.”

Other enduring strategic tensions include the difficulty of aligning fortifications with the state’s broader security interests beyond the chosen defensive line. It takes “steady nerves” and the ability to watch “smoke rise on horizons you once controlled without losing your self-confidence,” Gaddis warns. This dilemma has long been a central theme in American strategy toward the Pacific. George Kennan’s strategy of containment in Asia was based on an offshore defensive line centered on Japan and the first island chain, yet he could not abide the loss of Korea to the Communist camp—a tension he never resolved. Truman did resolve it, responding forcefully to North Korea’s invasion of the South in June 1950 and then signing a security treaty with the Republic of Korea in 1953.

The next year, smoke started to rise over the horizon in Indochina, and the defensive line was drawn farther forward onto the continent. Nixon pulled that line back to the island chain with the Guam Doctrine of 1969, but today the United States is dealing with new smoke over the horizon, as China coerces smaller states in Southeast Asia. Reassuring withdrawals are rare, Clausewitz notes, but overextension on the continent is just as dangerous for a maritime power. There is no right answer to this dilemma that can be imparted to strategists—only the importance of intuiting an answer based on the fox’s appreciation of context and contingency and an ability to see the strategic whole in the sum of the parts.

Gaddis’s guided tour never crosses into the Cold War, about which he claims he has said enough. However, the book anticipates postwar American strategy wonderfully. Tocqueville observed that a republican form of government based on checks and balances would be inimical to

strategy—the disciplined alignment of ends, ways and means. But as Richard Betts and others have noted, the American way of strategy has been effective, if often horribly inefficient.

Gaddis demonstrates why the Americans have been successful at strategy. He begins that narrative with Queen Elizabeth I on the evening of August 7, 1588, when the Spanish Armada met its fate and a seafaring English people set forth to establish a maritime empire. Elizabeth would be ruled by no man and no country, and she survived by balancing opposites both in her court and in the power politics of Europe. She was more agile at “pivoting” than the powerful Philip II, who, Gaddis concludes, became an immobile “pincushion.”

The Stuarts who followed Elizabeth were hedgehogs and had none of the Virgin Queen’s agility. They overreached in ways that produced the Glorious Revolution, a conflict

that defined both the Old World and the New, as protagonists fought from Devon to the Severn River in Maryland. The result was a constitutional monarchy that restored Elizabeth’s common sense if not her precise view of the sovereign’s divine right.

That same pragmatic ability to manage intractable contradictions was conveyed to the Founding Fathers, who created a nation based on the principle that all men are created equal while they papered over the blight of slavery and left it for another

day. Gaddis calls *The Federalist Papers* the most enduring work of political grand strategy since Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. Intrigued by that assertion (and, I confess, by the musical *Hamilton*), I went back and began re-reading the *Federalists* with my son. Gaddis is right. Hamilton’s, Jay’s, and Madison’s observations about great power politics, trade, and federalism still resonate.

Gaddis’s narrative arc then continues to Lincoln, who above all else learned to balance tensions and draw strength from contradictions, pivoting in the best Elizabethan sense as he pursued the moral imperative of emancipation but not at the cost of the Union. “I want God on my side,” he reportedly said, “but must have Kentucky.” Finally, Gaddis crosses the Atlantic to Winston Churchill, who, awaiting the Nazis after Dunkirk just as Elizabeth had awaited the Grand Armada over three centuries earlier, could famously tell Parliament that England would defend its island until “in God’s good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.”

In contrast to so many of the purveyors of grand strategy who disparage American political culture and urge policymakers in Washington to adapt the Old World clarity of Thucydides, Metternich, or Castlereagh (and none disparaged Americanism more than Kennan, as Gaddis demonstrates in his biography of that brilliant but flawed man), *On Grand Strategy* suggests that the contradictions embraced by the Founding Fathers are themselves potential strengths. If there is to be an American way of strategy, after all, it must be American. Yet Gaddis also leaves one wondering whether his collection of contradictions, tensions, and incomplete dialectics provides a full enough menu to help us intuit the right approaches to the major strategic challenges we face today.

For example, is it true that humility is always the right starting point for strategy? “*Laudace! Laudace! Toujours Laudace!*” Napoleon cried. Well, as Russia proved, maybe not *toujours* *laudace*. Nevertheless, one could argue that audacity has characterized more American strategic

James Graham Wilson<sup>1</sup>

successes than failures. James K. Polk's control of Oregon in 1846, Commodore Dewey's defeat of the Spanish in the Pacific in 1898, MacArthur's landings at Inchon in 1950, and Reagan's reversal of Soviet expansion with the Maritime Strategy in 1982 were all mismatches of ends and means that paid off. Perhaps in the shadow of the Iraq War this is too bold an assertion to make, but it is still worth distinguishing between respecting restraints and being bound by them—a distinction that might have made another fine theme for Gaddis.

And what of the nature of order and power in the postwar world that America (still) leads? The American empire was created by extending checks and balances to the international system after victory in the Second World War. As international relations scholar John Ikenberry notes, America became a "liberal Leviathan." Gaddis would no doubt appreciate this, noting as he does that the hardest task in *The Federalist Papers* was "showing how a republic could be an empire without becoming a tyranny."

Arguably, the greatest strategic challenge of our era is how to preserve that rules-based international order against anti-democratic revisionist powers employing gray-zone tactics that defy both the American assumptions about peace and the American way of war. *On Grand Strategy* focuses on war and deterrence, but the strategic art now must also include reassurance, shaping, and dissuasion. How would Gaddis characterize that particular tension? Would Elizabethan pivoting have suggested agile maneuvering between the reality of great power politics with China and the necessity of sustaining neoliberal norms? Would Lincoln have said, "I *want* God on my side, but I *must* sell Treasury bonds to China"?

Gaddis, fortunately, does not avoid the relationship of morality to strategy entirely. He never posits, as my former Johns Hopkins professor Robert Osgood did, that there is a distinction between "interests" and "idealism" in foreign policy strategy. In fact, successful American strategies have more often than not been premised on the understanding that justly governed states were more likely to be resilient against other imperial rivals and inclined towards American foreign policy priorities. Jefferson, Mahan, and Reagan all understood this. Even Henry Kissinger embarked on a series of speeches about morality in foreign policy in his final year as secretary of state, because he began to fear that a purely European form of realpolitik was unsustainable in American politics and might give way to neo-Wilsonianism (which it did, despite Kissinger's efforts, in the form of Jimmy Carter).

And yet there is an obvious tension in how one pursues the longer-term goal of justness with the nearer-term exigencies of crisis, confrontation, or war. Gaddis asks at the end of *On Grand Strategy* how the alignment of potentially infinite aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities could ever create fairness. His answer: "From *bending* the alignment toward freedom." I was on the National Security Council Staff (but not in the Oval Office) when Professor Gaddis visited with President George W. Bush and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice after 9/11. I later heard the president argue that one must be a "realist in the short-term, but an idealist in the long-term," and Rice's first speech on Asia as secretary of state began with the proposition that the United States would pursue a "balance of power that favors freedom." I have never asked, but perhaps they too were Gaddis's students.

Those who were definitely Gaddis's students at Yale tell me that reading *On Grand Strategy* provided a nostalgic return to the classroom. I must confess that upon finishing the last page and closing the book, I was filled with envy.

Note:

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

John Lewis Gaddis's *On Grand Strategy* is a compendium based on his semesters co-teaching Yale University's "Studies in Grand Strategy," a seminar he established in the early 2000s with fellow historian Paul Kennedy and retired foreign service officer Charles Hill. Grand strategy, or "the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities," is something Gaddis considers relevant to high politics and to one's self (21). "Your life as a student won't fundamentally change if you sleep for another twenty minutes tomorrow morning, at the cost of grabbing a cold bagel instead of a hot breakfast on your way to class," he writes. "The stakes rise, though, as you consider what you're learning in that class, how that relates to the other courses you're taking, what your major and then your degree are going to be, how you might parlay these into a profession, and with whom you may fall in love along the way" (21).

Gaddis's main theme in this book is a variant of F. Scott Fitzgerald's definition of a first-rate intelligence: "the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (14). That means acting like a hedgehog in some instances and like a fox in others—to use the metaphors closely associated with Isaiah Berlin, who is a central character throughout the book. The danger, for undergraduates, is allowing apparent contradictions to stand in the way of action. Nearly everyone who has been there can recall pondering the apparent contradictions between doing good and doing well. Professors face their own dilemma, since their role is to foster an unlimited desire to learn while also teaching students to appreciate their own human limitations. Whoever you are, the author suggests, and at whatever stage of life, it is probably a good thing to think about a grand strategy for life.

Gaddis writes with clarity and command, just as he has in his ten previous books. He is a reliable crafter of epigrams. "For as Wilson was trying to make the world safe for democracy, democracy was making war unsafe for the world," he writes, and "Lenin's specialty was transforming the unexpected into the predetermined" (272, 276). The breadth and ecumenical scope of key events and individuals in human history in *On Grand Strategy* are remarkable. In the first chapter, Gaddis quotes Uncle Ben Parker telling a young Spider-Man that "With great power comes great responsibility" (21).

The chapters to follow feature powerful individuals who either failed or succeeded in matching means with ends. Some of Gaddis's examples are more convincing than others. While the causes and consequences of the Peloponnesian War are of eternal relevance in the study of politics, the life of Augustus Caesar may not be. Gaddis's broader point, if I am conveying it accurately, is that individuals with what Clausewitz called the *coup d'œil*, or "inner eye," are connected to others across time and space. Patterns common to geopolitical conflicts throughout history, Gaddis appears to be saying, are also innate and discoverable in human beings born millennia apart.

Yet the connections that Gaddis draws among his characters sometimes struck me as tenuous. Reiterating that opposites held in the mind simultaneously are "the strategist's keys to victory," he writes that "it's as if Sun Tzu pre-channels, however improbably, F. Scott Fitzgerald" (83). Indeed, *very improbably*. "It's all the more interesting . . . that Augustus understood so much of Sun Tzu while knowing nothing of him," he goes on to say (91). *Perhaps*. In *The Federalist*, Madison "drew, knowingly or not, on Machiavelli" (173); later, Tolstoy may or may not have read Clausewitz, yet the two might be regarded alongside each other "as a commentary, in advance, on F. Scott Fitzgerald"

(213). “Clausewitz wasn’t available in English until 1873,” Gaddis acknowledges. “Lincoln, nevertheless intuited Clausewitz—although it would take him three years to find, in the unprepossessingly lethal Ulysses S. Grant, a general who already did” (237).

The drawback of these contrived interactions is that they detract from actual connections, such as the one between John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln. It is fitting, as Gaddis duly notes, that Lincoln was with Adams on the former president’s last public day. That connection matters because Lincoln went on to realize Adams’s objectives of internal economic development and, eventually, the abolition of slavery.

Meanwhile, the idea of beauty is absent from *On Grand Strategy*. As Robert Jervis put it in a 2014 interview with *International Relations*, “I deeply believe in the study of international politics and political science as aesthetics, as gaining pleasure from the attempt to understand the world for its own sake.” Not everyone who studies those topics for a living can honestly say that, and it is hardly a prerequisite that they do. Yet it would be awkward for literary scholars not to acknowledge the aesthetics of their subjects. In *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom wrote that his own selections shared a “strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange,” and that what connects canonical works is “their ability to make you feel strange at home.”<sup>2</sup> Gaddis hints at such a commonality in *On Grand Strategy* when he associates “lightness” with Isaiah Berlin, yet he does not sustain this theme throughout the ten chapters (107, 301). Here, I think, is a missed opportunity.

Just as there may be beauty in grand strategy, there may also be a grand strategy in beauty. Ludwig van Beethoven aspired to bring about universal harmony through the performance of his music. Beethoven famously grew disillusioned with Napoleon—who appears in this book but is not a central character—after he belatedly understood the emperor’s true ambitions. Is there a place for morality in Gaddis’s conception of grand strategy? In the final few pages of the book, he paraphrases Berlin’s categories of positive and negative liberties, grouping Napoleon in the former category, along with twentieth-century totalitarians and Woodrow Wilson, who truly cannot catch a break. At the same time, he advocates (I think) that statesmen recognize man’s fallen state, which Berlin called “pluralism.”

Yet it is still unclear to me whether Gaddis sees a moral code that exists apart from the sublime self-interest of successfully configuring means to achieve ends. It may well be a question of scale: criminal law, ethics, and religious convictions restrict the behavior of individuals within a community yet may never actually apply to heads of state who are seeking to establish order out of chaos. Was it morally right for Franklin Roosevelt to cooperate with Josef Stalin to advance the shared objective of defeating Nazi Germany? No strategy or politics is ever pure, Gaddis writes, and in this case he defers to Hal Brands and Patrick Porter, who point out that if Roosevelt’s grand strategy wasn’t a successful one, no strategy would be (288).

Indeed, the same could be said about Gaddis’s training of graduate students at Yale and Ohio University: if he isn’t a successful teacher, no teacher would be. I wonder: how have his experiences in the classroom shaped his thinking on grand strategy? Some of the chapters read as lectures, which he has surely been reworking and refining throughout (at least) the existence of the seminar he has co-taught. Yet it is not clear from this book how interaction with students has led him to refocus his scope or rethink his assumptions and conclusions. There were times when I got to the end of a section or chapter and thought to myself that he must have triggered a few reactions when he said this in a lecture hall for the first time.

A related question: how does Gaddis conceive of grand strategy with respect to the discipline in which he received his Ph.D. at the University of Texas? In its manuscript submission guidelines, *Diplomatic History* states that it “is the only journal devoted to U.S. international history and foreign relations, broadly defined, including grand strategy, diplomacy, and issues involving gender, religion, culture, race and ethnicity, and ideology.” Over at least the past twenty years, the field of “the U.S. and the World” has not always gone in the same direction Gaddis has. I wonder whether he sees opportunities to apply the methods and research agenda of grand strategy to some of the other topics covered in this description of the flagship journal of the Society for the Historians of American Foreign Relations.

A final question has to do with evidence. In making his case, Gaddis draws freely upon literature and popular fiction across time and space. Simply put, do we need to stick to observed and recorded facts in order to teach history? Students can learn a great deal about the mood of Washington during the 1980s from the television show *The Americans* (2013–2018), in part because producers Joel Fields and Joseph Weisberg were so meticulous about the sets and scenery as well as the chronology of U.S.-Soviet relations. What their fictional versions of Soviet and American arms negotiators were prepared to put on the table for the December 1987 Washington Summit—a trade of the Soviet “Dead Hand” system for the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)—is more scintillating than the actual agenda, which was to try to come up with a counting formula for a Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (which, incidentally, the negotiators actually did, and in a way that was important to the eventual 1991 agreement). Yet it would be ridiculous to consider using *The Americans* in a seminar on the end of the Cold War and then not do so because of that particular narrative enhancement.

The same can be said about *The Crown* (2016–), which covers the basic dynamics of Cold War diplomacy and makes private and complicated people a lot more human. And Winston Churchill’s 1940 trip to the London Underground in *Darkest Hour* (2017) is pure fiction, but the words Churchill allegedly strung together from those ordinary citizens in that encounter are part of his actual mobilization of the English language. As Gaddis reminds us, Churchill reached back at least to Canning—if not Pericles—when he said “[if] this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the oceans armed and guarded by the British Fleet, will carry on the struggle until in God’s good time the New World with all its power and might sets forth to the rescue and liberation of the Old” (181).

Yet this blending of fact and fiction can also lead one down a rabbit hole. Gaddis’s introduction to Abraham Lincoln is a scene from Steven Spielberg’s 2012 movie (screenplay by Tony Kushner) in which Lincoln explains to Senator Thaddeus Stevens that having a compass that tells you “true north” is not going to prevent you from having to veer off in other directions in order to avoid swamps, deserts, and other pitfalls along the way. While there is no evidence that this conversation ever happened, it captures the essence of Lincoln, according to Gaddis, who then cites it when he believes it illuminates patterns he sees among individuals.

This technique can be downright confusing. Gaddis uses it again in his introduction to Queen Elizabeth I, which is a passage from Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando* (122–23). Gaddis informs the reader that this is “as close to the great aging queen as we, from this distance, are likely to get.” Is this an eminent historian’s wry reflection on the inherent impossibility of reconstructing the past? I honestly cannot tell.

In sum, my takeaway from this book is that we all ought

to read more of the classics. I myself have no good excuse for not reading more broadly in college—although reading *Strategies of Containment* inspired me to read a lot more books about U.S. foreign relations. I found it downright impossible to read fiction in graduate school, because of what I regarded—shortsightedly—as the opportunity cost of reading the books I was supposed to. I knew that I was not going to take comprehensive exams in which I would be evaluated on a list of books that included *War and Peace* and *On War* and the few dozen that form the core of *On Grand Strategy*. But when it came to that particular crossing of the Hellespont, I suspect that they would have served me well.

Notes:

1. The views expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or U.S. Government.
2. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (Boston, MA, 1994).

### Author's Response

John Lewis Gaddis

My thanks to Robert Brigham, Andrew Buchanan, Michael Green, Peter Trubowitz, and James Graham Wilson for their (mostly) generous comments, and to Andrew Johns for obtaining them. But because unalloyed praise can be uninteresting, I also thank the reviewers for avoiding that. I'll respond similarly, focusing on their criticisms.

One is implied, if not explicitly stated, by all five: it's that *On Grand Strategy* is an odd duck of a book. It lacks the earnestness historians normally expect, as well as the rigor social scientists demand. It's conversational, impressionistic, and strangely casual about chronology, so that characters from one era converse with those from others across great gulfs of time, space, and culture. Most unsettlingly, the book relies occasionally on fake evidence, otherwise known as fiction.

But if you were running a seminar, would you allow it to plod along, as Virginia Woolf once put it, "without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; and on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads"?<sup>1</sup> Probably not, because "truths" in seminars are to be contested. The best ones deflate orthodoxies by exploring connections (even if improbable), by confronting contradictions (even if irreconcilable), and by sending away students exhilarated by what they've experienced (even if not quite sure what, if anything, has been decided). Green has it right, therefore: the point isn't to tell students *what* to think, but to suggest *how* they might think as they prepare for futures no one can now foresee.

*On Grand Strategy* grows out of seminars my colleagues Paul Kennedy, Charles Hill, and I have co-taught for almost two decades at Yale. Contrary to what Wilson suggests, we've never formally lectured in that class. We've preferred the spontaneity that allows curiosity: what might Sun Tzu and Octavian/Augustus have had in common, for example, or St. Augustine and Machiavelli, or Clausewitz and Tolstoy? What foxes and hedgehogs might Isaiah Berlin have found if allowed to range freely across time and space? And what *is* grand strategy anyway?

I've defined it as "the alignment of potentially infinite aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities," but Buchanan finds this inadequate. "[T]hat's it?" he asks incredulously, before going on, untactfully, to endorse Kennedy's more prolix alternative: "the capacity of a nation's

leaders to bring together all the elements, military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term . . . best interests." Where, though, does that "capacity" come from? Henry Kissinger, who should know, pointed out soon after switching from statecraft to memoirs that "the convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office."<sup>2</sup> But what is "intellectual capital"? And how far back is "before"?

Octavian was eighteen when he got the news of his great uncle Julius Caesar's assassination. Princess Elizabeth was nineteen when first forced to sit through "Bloody" Mary's Catholic masses. Abe Lincoln was not yet twenty when he poled a flatboat down the Mississippi into the heartland of American slavery. All were younger than most of our students, yet these events began their steady rise. They were adjusting aspirations to capabilities even as teenagers, but they would leave much wider worlds far from what they had been. Or, as Berlin might have put it, they were foxes (managing many things) and hedgehogs (pursuing one big thing) at the same time.

Berlin is often understood to have claimed the opposite: that you can't be both a fox and a hedgehog; that you have to choose; and that once you do you're stuck with the choice. Certainly it's hard to read his 1953 essay on Tolstoy, which unleashed the animals, in any other way. But Berlin admitted, late in life, that his animals had originated in nothing more serious than an Oxford party game, and that they'd been taken too seriously.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, they resembled George F. Kennan's 1947 "X" article in *Foreign Affairs*,<sup>4</sup> for in both instances vivid writing obscured subtleties in thinking, leaving both authors to be best remembered for what they'd probably have preferred to forget.

What Berlin should be chiefly remembered for, I've argued in *On Grand Strategy*, aren't his foxes and hedgehogs but rather the procedures he left for transcending such categories: for learning to live with contradictions, owing to the impossibility of having all good things simultaneously. Berlin makes this case in what I think is his finest essay, "The Originality of Machiavelli," unmentioned by any of the *Passport* reviewers, even though it inspired my "aspirations versus capabilities" definition. I'm a bit disappointed by the omission, but authors can't have everything they want at the same time either.

Because Berlin haunted me as I wrote the book, I decided to invite him into it: that's why he wanders in and out like a time-traveler in a science fiction novel. I have him alongside Xerxes at the Hellespont, with Machiavelli in 16th century Florence, and at Tolstoy's forlorn deathbed in 1910. He interprets America to the British in World War II, spends a legendary Leningrad night with Anna Akhmatova and Stalin's listening devices, and whispers posthumously into my ear as we watch Spielberg's 2012 movie *Lincoln*—where Daniel Day-Lewis, playing Lincoln, talks about the necessity, from the days of one's youth, both of having a compass and avoiding swamps. I can see, though, that this may have made reviewers somewhat queasy.

Which is perhaps why none here seem to have noticed St. Augustine, who shares a chapter with Machiavelli. Berlin's incompatibility of good things is the bridge between them: saving the soul, Augustine argued, is a good thing, but so is saving the state that protects those who try to turn other cheeks toward those trying to kill them. Machiavelli wouldn't have disagreed: both saw *proportionality*—apportioning violence, as opposed to applying it indiscriminately or refraining from it altogether—as a tragic necessity in a flawed world.

Which then opens up persistent tragedies in American history: the Founders' toleration of slavery in order build a union; the price Lincoln paid to undo that deal; the benefits he gained by preserving an *imbalance* of power on

the North America continent at the expense of those who got there first; among which benefits were three rescues of a *balance* of power that preserved freedom in Europe in the twentieth century – one of which, nonetheless, required collaboration with authoritarian evil. From this perspective, Berlin’s “bridge” extends quite a long way, from Augustine through Franklin D. Roosevelt, and well beyond.

So—no apologies for the oddness of this duck. *On Grand Strategy* records in print, I hope, something of the excitement of some excellent seminars, as well as fulfilling a long-time ambition on my part, which has been to write a book that says almost nothing about the Cold War. That made it fun to write, just as the seminars that inspired it were fun to co-teach. All the more reason, then, to thank my teaching partners, our students, and *Passport* for the opportunity to explain.

Notes:

1. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956; first published in 1928), p. 65.
2. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 58.
3. See *On Grand Strategy*, pp. 4-6.
4. I discuss this extensively in *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), pp. 249-75

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